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Working around trees, hills and an old market: How S'pore's heritage is being preserved in HDB estates

by Surbana Jurong on 20 October 2023

With site-sensitive and sustainable creations, global built environment consultancy Surbana Jurong Group and its member companies win multiple honours at HDB Awards 2023



Surbana Jurong Group receives seven design and engineering HDB awards for its projects including SkyResidence @ Dawson (pictured). PHOTO: TEAMBUILD ENGINEERING & CONSTRUCTION

For families living in the SkyResidence @ Dawson and SkyOasis @ Dawson Housing Board (HDB) Build-To-Order (BTO) housing estates, home is in a lush and leafy wonderland. When Singapore-headquartered global built environment consultancy Surbana Jurong Group designed the two estates located along Margaret Drive, it drew on the area's natural heritage for inspiration.

In the case of SkyResidence, it conserved the first market block in HDB's first town centre (Block 38) and six longstanding Angsana trees in the site's centre.

Mr Patrick Lee, Surbana Jurong's director of architecture from the township team, explains: "A city needs urban memories to foster a sense of belonging and rootedness for the people it hosts in a period of time. These heritage elements play an important role to define that memory.

"The design revolves around the conserved trees and the historic market, resulting in the establishment of a central communal area reminiscent of the former central square, now in a circular configuration. This design decision dictated the housing blocks' layout, with the buildings curving around the conserved features."



For SkyResidence @ Dawson, Surbana Jurong conserved Block 38, the first market block in Queenstown, and six existing Angsana trees. PHOTO: TEAMBUILD ENGINEERING & CONSTRUCTION

The estates' eight residential towers are also connected by a "green ribbon" – the first three-dimensional sky terrace in a HDB development that winds and rises from the main central plaza to the eighth storey roof garden of the carpark.

With this feature as well as sky terraces and roof gardens, Surbana Jurong included generous elevated green spaces at the site while meeting the brief for dense housing.

"We also placed the social amenities after careful analysis of the solar orientation and shading possibilities. The six conserved trees and blocks' layout provide shade like a giant umbrella," Mr Lee says.



Lush greenery at SkyOasis @ Dawson is a common design thread with SkyResidence as well as an extension from the adjacent park. PHOTO: SURBANA JURONG

At SkyOasis, located next to SkyResidence, a big open plaza and children's slide terrace act as a continuation of the green ribbon. Surbana Jurong also took a cue from the Alexandra Canal linear park adjacent to the site, extending greenery from the park towards the housing blocks in its design to integrate the estate into its surroundings.

"Blending the development with nature and its surroundings offers residents a serene place for contemplation and retreat from the bustling city," Mr Lee notes.

Surbana Jurong's innovative designs for the two estates earned them twin Design Awards at this year's HDB Awards. The annual awards commend the brilliance and dedication of HDB's business partners and encourage consultants and contractors to combine creativity with practicality in their projects.

Besides these two awards, Surbana Jurong and its member companies also received five other design and engineering nods at the HDB Awards 2023.

Solving challenges with imagination

Surbana Jurong's creative and site-sensitive design approach is also evident in its vision for the upcoming Bukit Merah Ridge BTO project, securing it a Certificate of Merit (Design).



At Bukit Merah Ridge, Surbana Jurong converted the main thoroughfare into a canopy walk – perfect for walks for the residents. PHOTO: SURBANA JURONG

In contrast to the typical layout for such projects, which places roads at the periphery, its design contributes to the larger urban environment by reversing the layout to have pedestrian walkways along the perimeter instead. The main thoroughfare is also

transformed into a canopy walk that wraps around the site and meanders around the existing trees.

“This way, we can conserve more than the minimum number of trees and maintain the lush canopy that encircles the site. On top of that, the canopy walk ties the development together. It connects to the adjacent market, Tiong Bahru Park, Henderson Community Club, and transport junctions,” says Mr Lee.

Surbana Jurong also turned the site’s challenging topography into opportunities for unique design. Multi-storey carparks are tucked into an existing hill, while residents can use a feature staircase to go up the hill for activity and communal spaces.



Surbana Jurong’s member company SAA Architects cleverly worked the site’s hilly terrain into its design for the Alexandra Vale Build-To-Order project. PHOTO: SAA ARCHITECTS

SAA Architects, another member company of Surbana Jurong Group, netted an Innovative Design Award for the forthcoming Alexandra Vale BTO project in the same neighbourhood. Its design pays tribute to the area’s hilly terrain too. Terraced planting over the four-storey carpark’s stepped tiers makes it resemble a hill from the ground level and enables greenery to cascade from a park at the top.

Projects slated for or in the midst of construction are honoured with the Innovative Design Award, which highlights ground-breaking concepts that transform the way people view public housing.

Mr Yeo Siew Haip, chief executive officer of SJ Global Architecture and SAA, shares: “With our collective expertise, we have delivered many innovative and ground-breaking public housing designs. Every project is an opportunity for us to realise aspirations and enrich lives for communities.”

Seeding new ways to enjoy nature

When residents move into the upcoming Ulu Pandan BTO estate, which spans Ulu Pandan Glades, Ulu Pandan Banks and Ulu Pandan Vista, they will also be close to nature in new and interesting ways, thanks to SAA’s design which won it another Innovative Design Award.



With Ulu Pandan Glades, Ulu Pandan Banks and Ulu Pandan Vista built close to the Dover Forest, it was natural for SAA to weave green elements into its design for the estate. PHOTO: SAA ARCHITECTS

Inspired by the site's existing greenery, SAA came up with three key guiding principles for its design: Intertwining the housing blocks with green corridors, layering different micro habitats to create a textured landscape, and embedding looping trails to boost people's well-being and improve connectivity throughout the estate.

For example, community gardening plots, shops, eateries, viewing decks and more are laid out in a recreation trail.



A looped fitness jogging trail connects three high-rise residential blocks in the Ulu Pandan BTO estate, overlooking the central catchment area in the North and sea views in the South. PHOTO: SAA Architects

Elsewhere, a therapeutic trail containing closed loop paths without dead ends allows people with dementia and their caregivers to navigate the space easily and safely.

Mr Michael Leong, SAA's deputy chief executive officer, says: "Designing for urban environments should not only be aesthetically pleasing but also cater to the well-being and diverse needs of its residents. The design choices we have made, from green corridors to active trails, is rooted in enhancing resident well-being and fostering community connections, all while maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature."

Discussion Questions:

What do you think is the most important aspect of urban liveability?

How is preserving heritage contributing to sustainable development?